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ABSTRACT

The transitions students make during their years of schooling are usually major events in their lives and in the lives of their parents. The stresses created by these transitions can be minimized when the new environment is responsive to each particular age group. This digest presents a brief overview of some of the issues involved in the transition from elementary to middle level school, including all middle grade and junior high school configurations, and provides suggestions for transition programs and activities. The digest delineates common concerns identified by students and specific challenges identified by teachers. It focuses on social, organizational, and motivational factors related to dealing with school transitions. Guidelines for planning effective transition programs are listed, including establishing a transition protocol that can be replicated and updated easily and asking participants to evaluate the transition programs. The digest also gives examples of several transition activities for use in designing a transition plan, including the distribution of school handbooks to families, and exchange of letters between students in the sending and receiving schools. The digest concludes by noting that effective middle level transition programs establish a sense of belonging among the multiple constituencies involved, respond appropriately to incoming students' needs, and provide multiple opportunities to develop a meaningful role during the transition process and to maintain that role throughout the school year. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/KB)

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The Transition to Middle School

Donna Schumacher

Students make many transitions during their years of schooling: from home to school, elementary to middle school, middle to high school, and high school to college or work. These transitions are usually major events in the lives of students and parents. The stresses created by these transitions can be minimized when the new environment is responsive to each particular age group. This Digest presents a brief overview of some of the issues involved in the transition from elementary to middle school and provides suggestions for transition programs and activities. The term "middle level schools" includes all middle grade and junior high school configurations.

Middle Level Transition Concerns

Student comments and behaviors give insight into their concerns as they move to a new school. Students in Gwinnett County, Georgia, when asked about their concerns in facing a school transition, mentioned the following worries: (1) getting to class on time, (2) finding lockers, (3) keeping up with "materials," (4) finding lunchrooms and bathrooms, (5) getting on the right bus to go home, (6) getting through the crowded halls, and (7) remembering which class to go to next (Weldy, 1991). In addition to these concerns, other studies include personal safety (aggressive and violent behaviors of other students) as a prominent concern of students (Anderman & Kimweli, 1997; Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Odegaard & Heath, 1992).

Teachers have also listed specific challenges to students making the transition from a sixth-grade elementary to a middle level school (Weldy, 1991, pp. 84-85): (1) changing classes; (2) reduced parent involvement; (3) more teachers; (4) no recess, no free time; (5) new grading standards and procedures; (6) more peer pressure; (7) developmental differences between boys and girls; (8) cliquishness; (9) fear of new, larger, more impersonal school; (10) accepting more responsibility for their own actions; (11) dealing with older children; (12) merging with students from five elementary schools; (13) unrealistic parental expectations; (14) lack of experience in dealing with extracurricular activities; (15) unfamiliarity with student lockers; (16) following the school schedule; (17) longer-range assignments; (18) coping with adolescent physical development; and, for some, (19) social immaturity; and (20) a lack of basic skills.

Social Factors

Students' perceptions of the quality of school life decline as they progress from elementary to secondary school, with the largest decline occurring during the transition to a middle level school (Diernert, 1992). Meeting social needs during the transition from an elementary to a middle level school is a major consideration because most programs focus more on academics and regulations. In Diernert's survey of 23 fifth-graders in a middle level school, of the top 11 (out of 23 possible) needs identified by boys, 6 were social, 2 were academic, 2 were procedural, and 1 was academic and procedural. Of the top 10 needs identified by girls, 5 were social, 2 were academic, and 3 were procedural.

Organizational Factors

Students who move into middle level schools from elementary grades that rotate students between classes at least part of the day reported feeling better prepared to enter a middle level school. Waggoner (1994) investigated transition concerns and the self-esteem of 171 sixth-graders. Students from teamed settings in elementary schools demonstrated a stronger affiliation in school activities and fewer concerns about the transition to junior high school than students in self-contained sixth-grade classrooms. Teachers in teamed settings felt their students exhibited fewer indicators of stress related to progressing to junior high school than teachers of students in self-contained sixth-grade classrooms. Sixty-six percent of all students surveyed believed they would be better prepared for seventh grade if they had more than one sixth-grade teacher (Waggoner, 1994).

Motivational Factors

In middle level schools, it is important to emphasize mastery and improvement, rather than relative ability and social comparison. Empirical evidence suggests that middle schools tend to stress relative ability and competition among students more, and effort and improvement less, leading to a decline in task goals, ability goals, and academic efficacy. Working in groups, focusing on effort and improvement, and being given choices all support a more positive task-focused goal structure (Anderman & Midgley, 1996).

Effective and Comprehensive Transition Programs

The transition into middle level schools is accompanied by intellectual, moral, social, emotional, and physical changes taking place in at least part of the transition group at any given time. Students making the transition into middle level schools need to receive assistance prior to, during, and after the move so that their social, psychological, and academic well-being is not compromised.

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Effective and comprehensive transition programs help (1) build a sense of community; (2) respond to the needs and concerns of the students; and (3) provide appropriate, faceted approaches to facilitate the transition process.

The following guidelines are suggested for planning transition programs (Weldy, 1991):

- Provide several activities that will involve students, parents, teachers, and staff from both schools in the transition process.
- Establish a transition protocol that can be easily replicated and updated annually with little effort.
- Establish a timeline for the transition process.
- Schedule meetings between collaborative groups from sending and receiving schools and discussions for adults and students about the issues.
- Assess the human and financial resources available to support the transition process. Identify adult and student leaders from all schools and constituencies to help with the transition.
- Ask students, teachers, guidance counselors, parents, and others to evaluate the transition program.

Transition Activities

The following examples may be helpful in selecting or creating a transition plan to best suit your community:

- The need for curriculum articulation for all teachers at all levels should be clearly understood. Teachers from sending and receiving schools can meet to discuss curriculum and instructional practices.
- Teachers from receiving schools can visit the sending schools to initiate personal contacts.
- Letters can be sent home welcoming students and families, and inviting them to school activities.
- Parent Teacher Association members can call each new family welcoming them to the school.
- Guidance counselors and special education teachers from each school can meet to share information.
- Students of the receiving school can become "ambassadors" of goodwill. Student-to-student contact, preceded by a discussion of what information might be useful to new students, can help establish personal links. Sending-school students can be paired with receiving-school students for visitation days.
- Letters between students in the sending and receiving schools can be exchanged.
- Programs new to the entering students can be highlighted during student visitations.
- An unstructured open house can be held prior to the opening day of school; a structured evening open house can be held during the second week of school.
- A school handbook can be distributed to each family. Be sure to include phone numbers; school history; yearly schedules; teachers identified by grade level, team, and subject taught; bell schedules; lunch procedures; and other practical information.

The School Community

The students, teachers, administrators, parents, staff, business partners, and residents in each school community contribute to the establishment, communication, and refinement of the various factors that define their middle level school. Effective middle level transition programs establish a sense of belonging among the multiple constituencies involved, appropriately respond to the needs of the incoming students, and provide multiple opportunities for all constituencies to develop a meaningful role during the transition process as well as maintain that role throughout the school year.

For More Information

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